We all know that it’s good for dogs to work. Gun dogs, sled dogs, detection dogs, police dogs, avalanche dogs and guide dogs all complete long and often intensive training schedules. The same goes for circus dogs, past and present.

Working dogs were depicted in many paintings, but only a few artists painted circus dogs. One of them was the Belgian artist Charles Van den Eycken (1859-1923), who became known for his paintings of cats and dogs that appear naughty or show human characteristics. Van den Eycken exhibited his paintings in Brussels, Liège, Ghent and Antwerp. Queen Marie-Henriëtte of Belgium was one of his patrons. Curiously, Van den Eycken also used the signature Charles Duchêne.

In 1880, Van den Eycken painted a group of three circus dogs all dressed up. The small dog in the middle feels at ease behind the big one and has rested his chin and a leg on its back. The dog on the right wears a well-made ensemble. They seem to be ready for their performance, but it is also possible that they have just finished their act. In the foreground is a typical Dutch collecting box for money. Is the box empty because the money already collected by their owner has been gambled away? Or are the dogs about to perform and is the box ready for use?

Some experts think that the white rectangles sticking out from under the straw are envelopes, but I think they might be playing cards.

The location seems to be a stable; the straw on the brick floor is not enough to keep the dogs warm in the winter. On the left, against the wall, is something that resembles a large tambourine, but it could also be one of their props.

This is not Van der Eycken’s only painting of circus dogs. Another one shows two small dogs, resembling a Brussels Griffon and a Lhasa Apso that also wear white collars and seem to be ready for their act. Griffon-like dogs were favorites of Van den Eycken, who painted them by the dozen. He immortalized his own Griffon in a painting of the dog standing on the artist’s palette.

Both Van den Eycken and fellow countryman (Joos) Vincent de Vos (1829-75) became competent at painting animals in somewhat unusual settings.

He became known for his paintings of cats and dogs that appear naughty or show human characteristics.
De Vos included circus dogs in his painting *The Circus Troupe*, as well as a monkey wearing a red coat, a recurring subject in his paintings. In the foreground there seems to be a standoff about who is entitled to eat the food, the small terrier or the larger dog. The dressed-up, cheeky monkey looks on with disdain and I think he’s sitting at his master’s table while feasting on a glass of wine that was not meant for him.

De Vos showed more variation than Van den Eycken in his work. His paintings include dogs at a dog market, dogs resting after the hunt, circus monkeys riding on dogs, and a dressed-up terrier with a pipe and a glass of wine.

In his studio in Kortrijk, Belgium, de Vos kept a small zoo: dogs, monkeys, foxes and even a camel. He exhibited in Belgium and France, but his work is also known in the United States.

**SALTIMBANQUES**

The training of dogs and other animals is as old as the human race. Basically, the training principles do not differ very much, whether for canine freestyle, agility or a circus act.

For ages, the so-called saltimbanques, traveling performers, presented their acts at annual fairs, carnivals and small circuses. Quite often they were accompanied by animals – mostly dogs. An example of such a traveling street performer is Vitalis, who owned four trained animals: the monkey ‘Joli-Coeur’ and the dogs ‘Capi,’ ‘Dolce’ and ‘Zerbino.’ In the story about the foundling Rémi, in Hector Malot’s 1878 children’s book *Sans Famille* (*Nobody’s Boy*), Vitalis, Rémi and the animals were a kind of one-man circus.

In the 1800s, dogs were also performing in the streets of London and Paris. By the beginning of the 19th century, Punch and Toby – ‘Toby’ being a trained dog – were known nationwide; in 1896, Miss Doré presented her tightrope-walking Poodles for the first time.

**DRUM ROLL**

The history of the modern circus – traveling with wagons, performers and animals – began in the 1770s when Philip Astley, a pensioned sergeant-major of the British cavalry, started a riding school in London. For a small fee, he performed every afternoon with his horses. In 1773, he hired a comedian – “Mr. Merryman” – and had his wife accompany his horse-riding act with a drum roll. Astley’s Amphitheatre is considered the precursor of the modern circus.

At the beginning of the 19th century, acrobats, tightrope walkers, clowns and magicians performed in the circus, and qualified horse and wild-animal trainers joined the artists. Around the same time, circuses in the United States were attracting audiences with lions, tigers and elephants.

In the 19th century, dogs were not...
trained as they are now. Sometimes they were forced to do tricks, and they were not always treated well.

In the early 1920s, the Jack London Club was founded in England; their goal was the abolition of animals in circuses. Nowadays, circus animals are generally well cared for. After all, animals that are sick or in poor condition can’t perform. Furthermore, the authorities have tightened the laws and supervision.

**REWARD-BASED TRAINING**

When training a dog for the circus, handlers use the same tools as, for example, obedience or agility. Performances in the circus ring resemble heelwork to music and freestyle at Crufts; all rely on reward-based training.

Poodles are historically the most popular circus dogs, but I have also seen Dalmatians, Bichon- and Griffon-types, terriers and mongrels.

Looking at the pictures in this article, one must admit that the dogs are not skinny, or shy bags of bones. On the contrary, they look pretty normal and healthy, doing work for their owner. Still, there is a kind of aversion toward the use of animals in circuses; some municipalities in Europe have banned circuses that use animals.

Posters of the paintings by Van den Eycken and by De Vos are available. By surfing on Google, many suppliers can be found.

**BEHIND THE SCENES**

Over the years, artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Marcel Vertes (1895-1961) and the Dutch horse and dog painter Otto Eerelman (1839-1926), have depicted circus dogs. Eerelman’s watercolor *Training Dogs, Rehearsing for a Performance* offers a wonderful glimpse behind the scenes of a circus.

A modern depiction of a circus dog was made by contemporary American artist Hilda Spain-Owen. Her highly colorful acrylic on canvas *Call of the Circus* portrays a Whippet balancing on a ball.

**BORZOI AND DALMATIANS**

Many modern circuses don’t have lions, tigers or elephants, as keeping them is more or less unaffordable, and people no longer value tricks with wild animals. More and more, audiences are entertained by donkeys, ponies, dogs, acrobats, clowns and trapeze artists. A good example of such a modern circus is the German circus Henry Renz Manege’s performances with a Jack Russell Terrier, three Dalmatians, a donkey, Standard Poodles and two Borzoi. Complete with lighting effects, classic circus music, humor and costumes, their acts are very popular with children, especially because of the performing pets.

The circus dogs of Van den Eycken in 1880, the saltimbanques and their dressed-up dogs, and Circus Henry Renz with its donkey-and-Dalmatians act in the 21st century… exactly... nothing new under the sun.